# What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique

**What constitutes the good of education? Reflections on the possibility of educational critique**

**Gert Biesta**
Centre for Public Education and Pedagogy, National University of Ireland at Maynooth, Ireland & Moray House School of Education and Sport, University of Edinburgh, Scotland, UK

**Opposing authoritarianism**

I am grateful to Michael Peters for stepping in at the last minute when I was unable to make it to Beijing. And I am grateful for the opportunity to respond to his reflections on the educational good, which he formulated with reference to ideas from my book *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy* (Biesta 2010), marking the occasion of the publication of the Chinese translation of this book. Michael makes a strong case for a *contextual* answer to the question of good education and the good of education, which he contrasts with what he characterises as my ethical, non-contextual and, in a sense, even foundational approach. I fully agree that questions about what makes education good, what counts as good education, and what constitutes educational goods, cannot be determined *in abstracto*, and cannot and should not be decided *ex cathedra*, that is, from some authoritarian position. On that point I think that we fully agree.

Actually, my case for bringing the question of the good of education back into the educational conversation was precisely motivated by developments that did try to determine what good education is in a rather authoritarian and de-contextualised manner. I was particularly responding to the suggestion that education should be about the effective production of a narrow set of measurable 'learning outcomes.' This idea has been pushed explicitly over the past decades by a global educational measurement industry in which the OECD has managed to make itself a key-player (for an excellent analysis see D'Agnese, 2017). By suggesting, as is implied in such measurements, that education is 'all about learning,' without ever asking the question what such learning actually *is*, what educational learning is supposed to be *about* and supposed to be *for*, and *who* should have a say in answering these questions, the global educational measurement industry has actually promoted a very specific definition of education's good, without ever articulating this definition explicitly, let alone providing a justification for it. Moreover, it has managed to do so in a very seductive way (Biesta, 2015[a]) – particularly seducing politicians and policy makers, but also the wider public – by tapping into populist ideas about the alleged 'basics' of education and the suggestion that large-scale measurement can relieve us from difficult normative and political questions about the content, form and direction of what happens in schools, colleges and universities.

What is particularly helpful about Michael's reflections is that he shows that the webs in which education appears to be caught, have, over the past decade, become even more complex and multi-faceted, with new forms of control replacing older forms of discipline. What his reflections also show, is that such developments are never simply acting upon

education from the outside – which would rely on the too simplistic assumption that education starts out as some kind of uncontaminated 'space' that subsequently has become colonised – but emerge from the very inside of educational practices and policies as well. this is often done with the promise that if we have more data, more information, more monitoring, and more innovation, education will become better, either for some, but there is always also the promise in the background that educational innovation will eventually benefit everyone in equal message – the promise of equal opportunities for all (on the complexities of this promise see Biesta, in press[a]).

**On the terms of critique**

One important question in relation to these developments is what kind of 'push back' is needed and also what kind of 'push back' is possible. This is the question of critique, and I continue to believe that part of our work as academics is to articulate critique and provide resources for the wider educational field to engage in their own forms of critique, resistance and re-articulation of what happens and should be happening in education. My own suggestion to return to the question of *good* education, rather than spend all efforts and resources on the *effectiveness* of education, has been one such critical intervention. More specifically, by suggesting that the question of what education is *for* can never be answered in a mono-dimensional way, but always needs to engage with the three-fold 'remit' of education – the work of qualification, the work of socialisation, and the work of what I have termed subjectification (see Biesta 2010; in press[b]) – I have tried to provide the field of education with a language for engaging with the discussion about education's good in a more precise, sufficiently complicated and, in my view, adequately educational manner. This is not, then, an attempt to define what education should be about from the outside, in an authoritarian way, or without a sense of context, but about generating resources with which the discussion can be carried out better than just talking about 'measurement,' 'outcomes' and 'effectiveness' – the concepts that continue to dominate the discussion and, as I have tried to argue, are actually undermining meaningful debate about the goods of education.

One thing I wish to emphasise about my proposal that any discussion about the goods of education and about what makes education good should take into consideration three domains of purpose – qualification, socialisation and subjectification – is that it seeks to highlight a properly educational engagement with the question of the goods of education. I am aware, and have written about this elsewhere (see Biesta, 2011), that the use of the adjective 'educational' is not very common in the English language and within the history of the field of education in the English-speaking world. Whereas in the English speaking world education is often seen as an object of study for educational research and a relatively 'neutral' institution for education policy makers – which means that both researchers and policy makers 'approach' education from the 'outside,' so to speak -- the Continental approach takes a more 'interested' approach, starting from the assumption that education is about the

encounter between the generations in which the freedom of the new generation is at stake. Here education is not seen as an instrument for the realisation of external goals, purposes or ambitions, but refers to those practices and interactions, to put it briefly, that have an orientation towards the emancipation of the one's being educated. For this reason, it is possible to ask how educational schools or education systems are, that is, to what degree they do not just function as systems of cultural or social reproduction, but also contribute to ways in which students can be agents or subjects of their own life – the theme of subjectification.

To articulate the educational interest in this way is of course fraught with difficulties, and it is important for educational scholars to continue the conversation about what might constitute the educational interest, how it might be articulated and, most importantly, how it might be justified. This work, which has been going on at least since 1762, the year in which Rousseau published his *Emile* (Rousseau, 1979), does seek to identify and articulate what is properly educational about education. In doing so, it attempts to overcome educational functionalism, that is, the idea that education should just do what 'others' – be it politicians, be it societal groups, be it big business, be it the church, be it parents, be it students themselves – would want it to do. Also, it seeks to overcome an all too ethical determination of education, one in which it is suggested that ethics should provide the aims of education and psychology or effectiveness research the (effective) means for achieving those aims. The interest in and search for the 'educational' seeks to articulate education's *own* interest, so to speak, which has something to do with safeguarding the freedom of children, young people, pupils and students to lead their own life or, in the terms of Hannah Arendt, safeguarding their natality, their capacity for beginning something *new* (see Arendt 1977). Such an interest can, of course, not be justified in a general, foundational or a-contextual way. Its 'sense' rather is contextual and, more specifically, historical, as it refers to all those situations from our recent history where freedom, particularly the freedom to begin something new, was denied, was seen as a problem, as an option that needed to be suppressed and eradicated rather then nourished and protected. This theme is older than a reflection on the atrocities of the 20th century but for our time it is at least connected to Adorno's call that 'after Auschwitz' the first demand upon all education is that Auschwitz will not happen again (see Adorno 1971).

**Pushing back, educationally**

Articulating such an educational 'vantage point' is first of all important in order to be able to push back against the apparent 'common sense' of contemporary education, particularly as it has been 'promoted' – and the word 'promoted' is probably a bit too soft given the devastating impact it has had around the world – by the global education measurement industry. As long as we think of education as merely a function of society, there is no way in which education can be defended when society, or powerful forces within society, decides to utilise it for particular ends – be it to become the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world (an ambition articulated by Europe in recent years, or equipping all

'learners' with the 21st century skills they need to flexibly adapt to an uncertain future (another popular ambition in many countries that never seems to be concerned with the question whether everything we will encounter in the future simply asks from everyone to adapt and adjust to it; see Biesta, 2015[b]). To claim that education has its own integrity, its own interest, its own concern, is crucial in order to push back against all tendencies to approach and (ab)use education as a mere function, a mere 'instrument' that can be put to work for any agenda.

This is also important for the theme that is central in Michael's essay – that of innovation. Education, world-wide, suffers from an obsession with the new, with renewal, and with the assumption that what is new is better, and hence what is not new, what is old, must be worse or bad. The demand for educational innovation not only puts a relentless pressure on education to constantly keep up, constantly go for the latest fashion, without providing much time for careful judgement about what is on offer and about what is actually needed. Fashion is the appropriate word here, because the whole point of fashion – and of the ever faster cycles by which the fashion industry produces its collections – is not to meet the needs of consumers, but constantly generate more wants, generate more desire for the latest fashion, also on the suggestion that if one doesn't opt for the latest fashion one will be behind of those who do 'keep up.' The analysis here is not very difficult, and the environmental problems caused by 'fast fashion' are beginning to create awareness of the fundamental problem here, at least where it contains clothing. Hopefully this is going to help in the field of education as well, particularly in order to expose that the 'new' is not necessarily or automatically that which serves the educational point of schools, colleges and universities best.

Michael is also acutely aware that such a 'technocratic' conception of education – he characterises it as an economic view – is deeply problematic. Yet rather than blocking innovation altogether which, I agree, is impossible to do anyway, he opts for an alternative view and an alternative practice, if I understand him correctly, which he refers to as social innovation. Is this a desirable future, for society and for education? I am less optimistic than Michael seems to be, and perhaps the main reason for this has to do with his mainly positive appreciation of 'openness,' that is, of 'openness' generally being a force for the good. I am not sure, and I am perhaps also not entirely sure how sure Michael himself is. Yes, if openness is linked to radical social democracy, then openness can be a force for the good – for furthering the case of freedom and equality and thus democracy itself. But this requires a particular 'quality' of openness, a particular 'orientation,' a particular 'concern,' and without this concern openness can, in my view, go in many directions, of which democracy is only one.

The ten core principles of social media he lists, for example, can support developments that are desirable from the perspective of democracy, but can also do the opposite. Self-organising social structures are, after all, not automatically clustered around valued of equality and solidarity; the can also cluster around racism, (neo-)Nazism, and so on. Personalisation can

tailor processes to the preferences of individuals, but says nothing about the quality or orientation of such preferences. Virtual communities in which relationships are sought, can work for the common good or for spreading terror. 'Swarm intelligence' or a 'global brain' remind me more of Ortega y Gasset's 'masses' than of democratic grass roots movements. The question, then, is how such open processes can gain or maintain a sense of direction. And here I would suggest that, at least where it concerns education, we need to keep working on meaningful articulations and justifications of the 'educational' – knowing that as soon as we give up this quest other forces will enter the scene. And this is perhaps the biggest problem we are already facing today, in education and society at large. The challenge, then, is how we can continue the practice of critique, without becoming foundational or fundamentalist and without thinking that 'strong' ethics provides the way out. Ongoing reflection on what makes education educational may at least provide part of what we need today.

ORCID
Gert Biesta orcid.org/0000-0001-8530-7105

**References**

Adorno, Th.W. (1971). *Erziehung zur Mündigkeit. Vorträge und Gespräche mit Hellmut Becker 1959-1969*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag.

Arendt, H. (1977[1961]). The crisis in education. In H. Arendt, *Between past and future: Eight exercises in political though.* Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Biesta, G.J.J. (2010). *Good education in an age of measurement: Ethics, politics, democracy.* London/New York: Routledge.

Biesta, G.J.J. (2011). Disciplines and theory in the academic study of education: A Comparative Analysis of the Anglo-American and Continental Construction of the Field. *Pedagogy, Culture and Society 19*(2), 175-192.

Biesta, G.J.J. (2015[a]). Resisting the seduction of the global education measurement industry: Notes on the social psychology of PISA. *Ethics and Education 10*(3), 348-360.

Biesta, G.J.J. (2015[b]). The duty to resist: Redefining the basics for today's schools. *Research on Steiner Education 6*, 1-11.

Biesta, G,J,J. (in press[a]). Perfect education, but not for everyone: On society's need for inequality and the rise of surrogate education. *Zeitschrift für Pädagogik.*

Biesta, G.J.J. (in press[b]). Risking ourselves in education: Qualification, socialisation and subjectification revisited. *Educational Theory.*

D'Agnese, V. (2017). *Reclaiming education in an age of PISA. Challenging OECD's educational order.* London/New York: Routledge.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1979[1762]). *Emile, or On Education*. Trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books.

Gert Biesta
National University of Ireland at Maynooth & University of Edinburgh, UK

gert.biesta@mu.ie